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"NOW GOE SEEKE THY PEACE IN WARRE": JONSON'S STOIC CONSOLATIO

GREGORY M. SADLEK

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Ben Jonson's "An Epistle to a Friend, to perswade him to the Warres," *Underwoods* 15 in Herford and Simpson's edition and 17 in the edition of William B. Hunter, has long been considered one of Jonson's most successful satires, but critics have traditionally been unable to explain satisfactorily how all its parts fit together. Starting with the conviction that the poem is based on classical models of satire, some critics find it odd that Jonson chose to frame his domestic satire with an introduction and conclusion concerning a soldier going off to war. As Wesley Trimpi has written: "The advice to Colby has very little to do with going to war—he might just as well be planning a journey to the Continent." While not wishing to deny the influence of classical satire on this poem—one can indeed profitably compare the body of the poem, lines 11 to 174, to the seventh satire of Horace's second book of *sermones*—I believe that, if we begin with a different generic assumption, i.e., that the poem as a whole is an adaptation of the classical *consolatio*, we will find that "An Epistle to a Friend" is much more unified, coherent, and successful than it seemed at first.¹

¹Ben Jonson, eds. C.H. Herford et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), VIII, 162–68. All quotations from the poem will be taken from this edition and cited in the text by line numbers. *The Complete Poetry of Ben Jonson*, ed. William B. Hunter, Jr., Stuart Editions (New York: New York Univ., 1963), pp. 147–53. Wesley Trimpi, *Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study in the Plain Style* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1962), p. 167.

Other scholars who treat the poem as satire are Kathryn Anderson McEuen, *Classical Influence on the Tribe of Ben*

Jonson's title may provide the first clue for a successful reading of the poem, for he called his work "An Epistle" rather than "A Satire." While, on the one hand, we might not wish to make too much of this—there is plenty of evidence, for example, that Horace considered his *epistulae* to be merely extensions of his *sermones*—yet, on the other hand, the title ought to tell us something.² For one thing, it might lead us to

(Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The Torch Press, 1939), p. 46, who believes the poem is Juvenalian rather than Horatian; and George Burke Johnston, *Ben Jonson: Poet* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1945), p. 90, who calls the poem "a Jeremiad." Judith Kegan Gardiner, *Craftsmanship in Context: The Development of Ben Jonson's Poetry* (Paris: Mouton, 1975), p. 93, treats the poem as an example of the verse epistle, as does Richard C. Newton in "'Goe, quit 'hem all': Ben Jonson and Formal Verse Satire," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 16 (1976), 105–16.

For the specific debt to Horace's *Sermo*, II, 7, see H/S, XI, 59, and also Trimpi, pp. 165–67.

²Scholars do not agree on the exact relationship between Horace's *Epistulae* and *Sermones*. While Newton seems to posit a rather definite division between the two, others argue that Horace considered them to be of essentially the same genre. G. L. Hendrickson, one of those who affirms their basic identity, in "Are the Letters of Horace Satires?" *American Journal of Philology*, 18 (1897), 313–24, argues his case from evidence found in the writings of other ancient authors. He quotes Porphyrio, for example, as follows: "Although Horace himself professes that his works belong to the poetical genus satire, nevertheless . . . he gave them special titles; *Sermones* and *Epistles*" (pp. 317–18). Trimpi (see pp. 9, 70, and 83, for example) also feels that the two forms were very closely linked. The most balanced approach seems to be that of Eduard Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), who writes, "Horace's *Epistles* are an organic continuation of his *Satires*. They show many characteristic features of those *sermones*, both in form and in matter. But at the same time they appear as genuine letters." (p. 310)

Thus, in Horace's *Epistles* one might expect to find many of the characteristics of formal verse satire pointed out by Mary Claire Randolph in her "The Structural Design of Formal Verse Satire," *PQ*, 21 (1942), 368–84, while, at the same time, one should also find in them that which is essential to a letter. In any case, what is true of Horace's writings one might expect to be true of Jonson's as well.

begin our analysis of the poem with the introduction rather than with the body of the poem. For another, it might suggest that we consider thoroughly the situation of the addressee, Colby, to see what it reveals about the context of the poem.

A private letter is a communication between two people, and if a literary epistle differs in any way from a private letter, it is in the amount of material that is of general rather than particular interest. Nevertheless, in a good epistle the character of the addressee ought to have some sort of influence on the contents. Commenting on Horace's epistles, Eduard Fraenkel has written:

We all know that many letters, in life as well as in literature, are in fact soliloquies. . . . But as a rule we shall find those letters most attractive in which not only the writer but also the person addressed, though not in a position to speak directly, is present, so that we see him before us or at any rate catch some glimpses of his character and of the world in which he is living.³

Thus, knowing about the character and the situation of Jonson's "friend" may prove helpful in understanding this epistle.

But just who was this Colby, named only once, in line 176 of the poem? Herford and Simpson state simply that his identity "has not been traced." Other of Jonson's editors are of no more help. Judith Gardiner, however, believes that a record of this Colby has been found in a license to leave England for the purpose of joining volunteers under the Earl of Wimbleton in the Dutch wars. The license was granted to Sir John Suckling

and one "Colbie XXXV yeres" in 1629. It is likely, writes Gardiner, that this is Jonson's Colby, "given Jonson's connection with Suckling and the appropriateness of the occasion. The friend is going off to Continental war in a time of English decadence and prolonged peace."⁴ Indeed, Gardiner, unlike Herford and Simpson, who assigned the poem to the year 1620, believes that Jonson wrote the piece in 1629. This was a black period of the poet's life, for his prestige at court was declining, he had recently suffered his paralyzing stroke, and he was humiliated by the public reception of *The New Inn*. It would have been a very appropriate time for such a satiric, and, as we shall see, stoic poem.

Even with Gardiner's discovery, there is little external evidence about Colby. Using internal evidence from the poem, however, Richard C. Newton argues that Colby had already decided to go to war by the time Jonson wrote "An Epistle to a Friend." He bases his contention on the abrupt change in tone that occurs in the conclusion of the poem beginning with line 175, where Jonson's persona moves from an "exacerbated hysteria" to a calmness indicative of his confidence in Colby's innate nobility.⁵ Thus Jonson may not really be *persuading* Colby to do anything; he may simply be trying to *console* a man who was facing an uncertain future: possible dismemberment and even, perhaps, death itself. The addressee Colby, then, did not need satire but consolation, and

³Fraenkel, p. 310. O.A.W. Dilke, "Horace and the Verse Letter," in *Horace*, ed. C.D.N. Costa, Greek and Latin Studies: Classical Literature and Its Influence (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 102, voices similar ideas.

⁴Gardiner, "Jonson's Friend Colby," *N&Q*, 22 (1975), 306.

⁵Newton, pp. 108, 113. Earl Miner in *The Cavalier Mode from Jonson to Cotton* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), p. 174, notes this shift as well.

the classical tradition provided Jonson with a literary genre appropriate to such an occasion.

The *consolatio* was a classical literary form which was first cultivated by the Greeks as far back as Democritus. Sister Mary Edmund Fern in *The Latin Consolatio as a Literary Type* has traced the history of the form through its flowering among the classical Roman writers, and Howard R. Patch has discussed both its reconstitution by Boethius and its subsequent popularity with later medieval writers. Fern, using especially the writings of Seneca as models, defined the genre as "a literary form . . . which had for its object the remedy or alleviation of the maladies of the soul."⁶ Brooding on death—either the approach of one's own or the actual death of someone close—was felt to be the primary cause of such sickness; but Seneca, for example, writes some of his *consolationes* to people suffering from lesser ills. Helping people cope with ill fortune of any kind, then, might be said to be the primary concern of writers employing this genre.

The general structure of a *consolatio* according to Fern included, first, an introduction, "where the author announce[d] the evil he wishe[d] to cure and the treatment he intend[ed] to supply," second, the consolation proper, which was generally divided into two parts, the first treating the person afflicted and the second treating the causes of the affliction, and, finally, the conclusion, which was supposed to bring the work to a fitting end. Much latitude, however, was allowed the authors as to

the way they applied the conventions. As Fern says:

Although this species of writing was bound by rules and conventions, yet there was an opportunity in the individual *consolatio* of giving a new turn and color to the old form. Its distinctive value depended upon the new result, the originality which the author achieved in each case.⁷

Jonson's poem, I would argue, can be seen to be a consistent, coherent unit if read as an adaptation of the Latin *consolatio*. This is not to say that he used all the possible consolatory *topoi*, nor is it to say that he slavishly imitated the form mentioned earlier. Instead, using his flair for satire, Jonson refurbished the old model in his own peculiar way. He based his consolation on Senecan stoicism: Colby cannot change his future, but he can embrace it as a free man rather than as a slave to fortune. Furthermore, by stepping up to meet his future boldly, Colby will distinguish himself from his English contemporaries, who are, at least in Jonson's eyes, all slaves, not only to fortune, but also to their uncontrolled passions. The theme of slavery to one's passions versus the freedom coming from reasoned behavior is also central to the seventh satire of Horace's second book of *sermones*—one of Jonson's sources, as was mentioned earlier—since Horace here does not condemn vice as vice, but specifically because it makes a man a slave.⁸

Horace's satire was surely not the only classical piece to influence Jonson in the

⁷Fern, p. 7.

⁸Gardiner agrees that the spirit behind Jonson's poem is stoic. In *Craftsmanship* (p. 93) she writes, "During the epistle the current topic of the nature of valor has been modified from its conventional meaning of martial bravery to something almost identical with stoic self-reliance and virtue—ideals consistently upheld by Jonson in the earlier commendatory epigrams and epistles."

⁶Mary Edmund Fern, *The Latin Consolatio as a Literary Type* (St. Louis: St. Louis Univ., 1941), p. 3. Howard R. Patch, *The Tradition of Boethius* (1935; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1970).

writing of this poem, however. Since Colby has not yet experienced the evils of war, Jonson must try to help him deal with the anticipation of ill fortune. Hence Jonson's epistle can also be compared profitably to the thirteenth epistle of Seneca to Lucilius, which Fern treats as an example of the *consolatio* genre.⁹

In this epistle, Seneca counsels Lucilius against groundless fears. He opens with a *laudation*, a stock component of the *consolatio*:

Multum tibi esse animi scio. Nam etiam antequam instrueres te praeceptis salutaribus et dura vincentibus, satis adversus fortunam placebas tibi, et multo magis, postquam cum illa manum conseruisti viresque expertus es tuas, quae numquam certam dare fiduciam sui possunt, nisi cum multae difficultates hinc et illinc apparuerunt, aliquando vero et propius accesserunt; sic verus ille animus et in alienum non venturus arbitrium probatur.

[I know that you have plenty of spirit; for even before you began to equip yourself with maxims which were wholesome and potent to overcome obstacles, you were taking pride in your contest with Fortune; and this is all the more true, now that you have grappled with Fortune and tested your powers. For our powers can never inspire in us implicit faith in ourselves except when many difficulties have confronted us on this side and on that, and have occasionally even come to close quarters with us. It is only in this way that the true spirit can be tested—the spirit that will never consent to come under the jurisdiction of things external to ourselves.]¹⁰

We see here that Seneca believes one's mettle is proven only by adversity. And while he believes that Lucilius does indeed possess the necessary inner strength to cope with his problems, he wishes Lucilius to discover this as well. The *laudation* is then followed by a list of consolatory *topoi*:

1. Seneca first urges courageous endurance, for more things are likely to frighten us than to crush us.
2. He then urges the use of reason, for some anticipated evils never come to pass.
3. Next he urges that, even if the worst does come to pass, Lucilius's mind should retain full control so that his death may shed glory on his life.

Finally, Seneca leaves Lucilius with a saying of Epicurus: "Inter cetera mala hoc quoque habet stultitia: semper incipit vivere" [The fool, with all his other faults, has this one also—he is always getting ready to live].¹¹ Thus, the kernel of Seneca's consolation is stoic: Lucilius is neither to be afraid of things which are merely possibilities nor to refuse to accept the things which cannot be changed, but to step bravely into the future.

Jonson gives a similar message to Colby in lines 183 to 186:

That fortune never make thee to complaine,
But what she gives, thou dar'st give her againe;
That whatsoever face thy fate puts on,
Thou shrinke or start not, but be alwayes one.

I believe that this is the core of the poem, for it is the message most relevant to the addressee, Colby. It is a theme, by the way, not unknown in Jonson's other writings—found, for example, in the opening paragraph of his *Discoveries*.¹² Furthermore, it was a theme that the poet himself needed to hear in 1629.

Returning to Fern's structural model, it is easy to see that "An Epistle to a Friend" fits the basic pattern of the Latin *consolatio*. In lines 1 to 10, the introduction, Jonson announces the spiritual malady he wishes to cure and his intended therapy:

⁹Fern, pp. 35–37.

¹⁰Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Seneca ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, ed. and trans. Richard M. Gummere, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1961), I, 72–73.

¹¹Gummere, ed., pp. 82–83.

¹²H/S, VIII, 563.

Wake, friend, from forth thy Lethargie: the
 Drum
 Beates brave, and loude in *Europe*, and bids
 come
 All that dare rowse: or are not loth to quit
 Their vitious ease, and be o'rewhelm'd with it.
 It is a call to keepe the spirits alive
 That gaspe for action, and would yet revive
 Mans buried honour, in his sleepe life:
 Quickning dead Nature, to her noblest strife.
 All other Acts of Worldlings, are but toyle
 In dreames, begun in hope, and end in spoile.

Colby, then, is not alone in his malady; it is all society which is afflicted with him. Jonson's friend, however, unlike the others, has a cure in hand, because he alone can respond to the "call to keepe the spirits alive." He alone, moreover, can rise above the misdirected "other Acts of Worldlings," which are "but toyle/In dreams" because Colby alone will be a free man rather than a slave to passions.

The consolation proper, as we have said, treats the person afflicted, but since here it is all society which suffers from spiritual "lethargy," Jonson's poem turns from Colby and treats the spiritual evils of society at large:

Friendship is now mask'd Hatred! Justice fled,
 And shamefastnesse together! All lawes dead,
 That kept man living! Pleasures only sought!
 Honour and honestie, as poore things thought
 As they are made! Pride, and stiffe Clownage
 mixt
 To make up Greatnesse! and mans whole good
 fix'd
 In bravery, or gluttony, or coyne,
 Al which he makes the servants of the Groine,
 Thither it flowes. (ll. 39-47)

As Boethius learned from Lady Philosophy, true spiritual health—and for those suffering, true consolation—is rooted in a sorting out of the true good from the apparent good. Those who are slaves to fortune or to passion cannot make this distinction, as Jonson seems to indicate here.

Jonson's remedy is interspersed throughout the body of the poem: "flee, flee friend," he writes, "This *Praecipice*, and Rocks that have no end, / Or side, but threatens Ruine" (ll. 129-31). Flight, however, is not urged for flight's sake alone as Newton argues; it is offered as a specific remedy for Colby because by fleeing English society Colby will be stoically accepting his own fortune.¹³ By "flight" to the wars, Colby will confirm his mastery over both fortune and passion; he will be, in Jonson's words, "commanding first [him]selfe" (l. 181).

The conclusion of Jonson's poem, lines 175 to 196, brings this *consolatio* to a fitting conclusion. We have already noted that the style and tone of these lines differs markedly from that of the body. The poem sends Colby off to the wars with "Thy true friends wishes," which encompass all of Jonson's moral "remedies" for society's spiritual "Lethargie" (ll. 1, 176). Colby himself, of whose "recovery" Jonson seems to have little doubt, can now be at peace. Perhaps echoing the conclusion of Seneca's thirteenth epistle, Jonson argues that, even if the worst should come, Colby's death will bring glory to Colby's name: "Now goe seeke thy peace in Warre" he writes, "Who falls for love of God, shall rise a Starre" (ll. 195-196).

Thus Trimpi is wrong when he says that Colby "might just as well be planning a journey to the Continent." This poem is indeed about war, and about a young man's decision to accept the fortune which has called him to it. In the body of the poem Jonson satirizes a society whose members seem all to be slaves to

¹³Newton, p. 107.

passion, but in his introduction and conclusion Jonson reminds his friend that a slave to fortune is hardly better than a slave to passion. In making this point, Jonson is able to open his poem onto a wider level, a level beyond the scathing

satire of lines 10 to 174, the level of stoical self-mastery in the face of ill fortune. The poet's satire, then, seems clearly subordinated to his consolatory purpose in this well-written, coherent work.